

To: Valerie Clarke

From: Dormer Ellis

Re: some chit-chat about International as requested

One of the advantages of becoming a member of a BPW Club is that, once every three years, you have the opportunity to participate in a BPW International Congress. The first such congress that I ever attended was held in Montreux, Switzerland over thirty years ago. I was immediate "hooked" and have been a regular participant ever since. These addictive events have drawn me to Asia, Africa and New Zealand as well as to four North American cities and five locations in Europe. The most recent was held in Helsinki, Finland in June of 2011 and the next congress will be in Korea in 2014.

Although there is a customary schedule including business sessions, workshops on contemporary issues, and social events, each congress provides memories of unique experiences. At the 1993 congress in Japan, the first West Indian international president opened congress not with the usual address but by singing the hymn "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me". She has a beautiful voice and soon women from countries around the world joined in. It was very moving. A decade earlier, when congress was held in Washington, a memorable event took place. One of the optional tours was a visit to the White House. It was a popular choice. There must have been some mix-up in the arrangements because, when the tour buses arrived it was learned that the international visitors were not expected and they were turned away. At the plenary session the next morning, there was a surprise visitor--none other than Ronald Reagan, President of the United States! He had come to apologize and was completely charming. He began by holding his hat onto the stage to see if it was safe for him to enter. He said he thought we would all be "mad at him". His friendly manner greatly impressed BPW members from countries where the head of state would never behave so informally.

In 1985, during a business session in Auckland, New Zealand, there was concern about the financial situation of the international federation. A small portion of every BPW member's fee to her Club is passed on to the international office. It was becoming insufficient to meet ongoing expenses. Taking a larger portion of individual members' fees would have caused hardship for some Clubs and raising the membership fee might have discouraged new members. A Swiss member, named Ursula, proposed a solution. She acknowledged that members differ greatly in their personal economic status. Those in the early stages of a career or with heavy family responsibilities have little disposable income but there are other members who could easily send in a hundred American dollars to the international office each year and "never miss it". When someone stated categorically that no one would send in money with no expectation of personal benefit, a member from Sweden announced, "I would". An American also said that she would do so and soon other members from many countries were saying the same thing. The "Friends of BPW International" had been created. I became a Friend that day in Auckland and have retained that designation ever since.

No BPW member is ever pressured to become a Friend. It is a personal decision made annually. An individual's economic situation can change due to retirement, health problems or family needs. If a Friend does not continue her annual contribution to international, her decision is accepted without question. Friends receive little recognition and some members are unaware of them. Occasionally, during a plenary session at an international congress, the President will ask any Friends present to stand. She will then say simply, "Thank you, Friends". Seeing someone sitting near them stand up sometimes prompts members to later ask, "What are Friends?"

The major advantage of being a Friend is that, during each congress, there is one event or excursion for which only Friends may purchase tickets. (Of course, there are alternative activities provided during the same period of time.) These Friends events are self-funding and provide an opportunity for Friends to get to meet each other while sharing an enjoyable evening. At the recent congress in Helsinki, the Friends chartered a boat and took a cruise on a lake. Then they climbed up a rocky pathway to a restaurant with a glorious view of the wooded shoreline. In June, daylight in Helsinki continues for 22 hours so the Friends were able to enjoy the scenery throughout dinner and a fun-filled evening.

BPW Canada hosted the 1999 congress which took place in Vancouver. The Friends event was a train trip through spectacular mountainous terrain. We were all glued to the windows of the carriages as the private train took us to a restaurant in a heavily forested area. On the return trip, all we could see out the windows was complete blackness as night had fallen. Some Italian friends began singing "A rivederci Roma" (in Italian, of course). Several anglophones knew the English-language version of this song so they sang along in their language. Then the Australians began singing and others joined in. One does not have to be Australian to know the words to "Waltzing Matilda". Canadians sang "Frère Jacques", some using French and others English. The Americans joined in. The Mexicans had a song in which the chorus was simply "Sí señor" which all of us could manage. Our choral world tour was such fun that we were sorry when the train pulled into the Vancouver station.

Although the number of voting delegates and alternates is determined by the membership of the various BPW federations, any member may attend a congress as a so-called observer. Observers can sit in on business sessions if they so desire and, under certain conditions, may contribute to the discussion. I have only had the right to vote on behalf of Canada at two of the twelve congresses I have attended. At the others, I have had a variety of roles. At Montreux and at Nairobi, I presented papers in workshops. There are always many tasks for which volunteers are requested. The more one is involved in a congress, the more interesting it becomes. I was a timekeeper during the 1987 congress in Holland. In Vancouver, I spent a day on the "Help" desk. I shared this duty with a BPW member from Zurich. I was supposed to deal with questions posed in English or French and she was to deal with those in her mother tongue of German or in Italian in which she was also fluent. We both knew some Spanish and hoped that, together, we might serve anyone who posed a question in that language. Having never been on a "Help" desk before, I expected that most questions would be easy ones like, "Where is the closest restroom?" or "Is it too late to buy a ticket to the banquet?" How wrong I was!

One needs all one's problem-solving skills to serve on the "Help" desk and a sense of humour helps too. An elderly English lady had dropped and broken her upper plate. She needed to find a denture repair clinic immediately. A Chilean, knowing that Canada was British, had changed her own currency into pounds sterling and was in urgent need of a currency exchange office. An Italian had found a round-about but cheaper route to fly to Vancouver. She arrived safely but her suitcase did not. She had very limited English and the combination of a very long journey, jet lag and stress made it disappear. She had not understood what she had been told at the airport and asked the "Help" desk where, when and how she could find her suitcase. Somehow, it had been sent to Winnipeg but it was forwarded to Vancouver and delivered to the congress site. An Ontario member was having dizzy spells and realized that she had left her medication in her hotel room. The "Help" desk was able to locate her room-mate at one of the workshops and she went back to the hotel to fetch the pills. The only question that was posed in Spanish actually was about the location of the closest "sanitarios".

At an international congress, it is usual to find that members from many other countries share the same concerns that preoccupy your own Club members. Together, resolutions are passed with the expectation that the matter will come to the attention of the United Nations and appropriate action taken. Nevertheless, sometimes one learns about serious situations abroad that were previously unknown. It was only through discussions at international meetings that I learned about bride burnings in India and female circumcision in Africa. The reverse is also true. Some Canadian concerns are not necessarily of high priority elsewhere.

One of the workshops at the Nairobi congress in 1991 was about reproductive technology. An Australian paper was presented and then I gave a report based on the recent findings of a Canadian Royal Commission on the subject. A lively discussion followed as the legal, psychological and social aspects of sperm donations, artificial insemination, "test-tube" babies and surrogate mothers were debated. Who should pay for the procedures? What if a surrogate mother wants to keep the newborn baby? Does a child have the right to know the identity of his or her biological father? Many different views were expressed. Near the end of the workshop, a young West African woman spoke for the first time. She said that she had chosen that particular workshop out of curiosity. She had not known what was meant by reproductive technology. She said that in her country what was needed was nothing so complicated and controversial--just a very cheap, entirely reliable and absolutely safe method of birth control! She ended by asking the rhetorical question, "If a woman can't get pregnant, why doesn't she just adopt some children?"

If once every three years is not often enough for a BPW member to meet her international sisters, she can attend regional meetings. Canadians belong to a region called "North America and the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean". Regional meetings are held every three years but not in the same year as an International Congress. Usually, ours is held on a sunny island in the West Indies (which is delightful when Canada's weather is turning seasonally cold). Exceptionally, the most recent of our regional meetings was held in Las Vegas in 2010.

By being an observer at a regional meeting other than one's own, a Canadian has additional opportunities to interact with overseas

sisters. I have been an observer at European Regional Conferences in Estonia, Sweden, Austria and Iceland. Ambitious young European women feel a need to work for a year or so in a foreign country in order to perfect a second language. English-speaking Canadians and Americans are unlikely to feel any pressure to do this. At one of the European conferences, a group of Young BPWs each spoke for one or two minutes about her employment experiences abroad and did so in a language other than her mother tongue. A French accountant described in English her adventures in Birmingham, a Swedish travel agent spoke in German about her employment in Munich, etc. I was very impressed by their self-confidence and achievements.

After each BPW Congress, optional tours in the host and nearby countries are available. Some congress attendees regularly arrange their vacation time so as to take advantage of these opportunities. Although I am not in the habit of joining any of these touring groups, I did so after the congress in Kenya and have wonderful memories of an African safari in the company of five other BPW travellers. Being so close to African animals in the wild was really delightful.

As the next International Congress is scheduled for Korea in 2014, members of BPW Canada still have time to plan their vacation time and to save their pennies for an interesting and memorable trip to Asia. I hope to see you there!

Dr. Dormer Ellis
Friend of BPW International